



Secrecy again

THE race is on. With the ruling PML-N attempting to build consensus around the proposed 27th amendment and opposition parties scrambling to present a united front, the next few days are expected to see a fresh round of wheeling and dealing over what fresh constitutional alterations will be approved. It is telling that no draft of the proposed amendment has yet come to the fore, even though the prime minister himself is rallying allies for the vote. This, of course, is not unprecedented. It was much the same when the 26th Amendment was being prepared for the vote — few knew what was in the legislation, but the expectation, given the pressure, was that lawmakers would vote in favour of it, without any questions asked. How the amendment was passed is now part of the historical record. It remains to be seen if the 27th amendment will be made part of the Constitution in the same way.

It is unfortunate that this has become the new normal. The onerous conditions placed on parliament for the passage of a constitutional amendment were meant to ensure that the process would be treated with the seriousness and sobriety it deserves. The ‘two-thirds of the total vote’ requirement, for example, was put in place to ensure that the Constitution would not be trifled with, and that any changes to it could only be enacted through parliament when there was an overwhelming consensus. A series of unfortunate decisions from the country’s top court over the past year have all but ensured that those checks and balances have been reduced to minor inconveniences, and that, too, which mostly exist on paper. And yet, there is such secrecy around the next set of major alterations to the law that the government will not even talk about them openly, let alone host a debate on their implications.

For now, any legislation to roll back the 18th Amendment has drawn a ‘no’, not only from opposition parties, but also from the PPP, whose votes are vital for any amendment to pass. One may, therefore, rest a little easier on this subject. However, at stake is also the future of two other institutions, and it appears at the moment that while the government may concede on the rollback of the 18th Amendment, it could get its way on the other subjects. This ‘lesser of the two evils’ way of enacting legislation does not convince anyone. It remains necessary for the acceptance and legitimacy of any amendment that it be debated openly and at length. Therefore, the incumbent regime should not set even a tentative date for voting on it till the public’s representatives make clear where they stand. Parliament must not be reduced to a rubber-stamp for the whims of the powerful.

PIA protest

THE dismissal of two PIA engineers signals an escalation in the ongoing confrontation between the airline’s management and its technical staff. The top two office-bearers of the Society of Aircraft Engineers of Pakistan have been sacked on charges of unauthorised disclosure of official information and holding a press conference without permission from the management. According to a PIA spokesperson, both office-bearers had refused to join the inquiry, forgoing the opportunity to defend their position. The dismissals come at a time when PIA is struggling to maintain its flight schedule amid a two-and-a-half-month-long protest by its engineers seeking a pay raise and improved service conditions. The engineers’ refusal to issue fitness certificates clearing aircraft for flights has severely disrupted several domestic and international PIA flights, stranding hundreds of passengers. Its management has since alleged that the tactic is part of an effort to hamper the airline’s privatisation.

Given the simmering resistance against the privatisation of the loss-making state-owned airline, the allegations cannot be brushed aside. Yet neither can they be accepted at face value. The allegation that the engineering staff may be deliberately undermining the airline’s functioning for political or personal motives is grave and requires a transparent independent inquiry. Likewise, the engineers’ contention that they are refusing to certify only those planes they deem unfit for flying cannot be ignored. Safety concerns, if genuine, must not be dismissed as an act of insubordination. The invocation of the Essential Services Act to silence staff and dismissals in an opaque manner risks deepening mistrust within the company’s workforce. In this context, the management’s punitive actions against the leaders of the engineering staff could deepen the unrest within the airline and trigger an active protest. What is at stake is not merely a labour dispute, but public trust in the national carrier’s operational safety. It has only been a few months since the EU and the UK have lifted a prolonged ban on PIA flights on safety grounds. The government must, therefore, ensure that facts are independently verified, and that justice is not only done but seen to be done. Anything less would further damage an airline already weighed down by years of mismanagement, political interference and eroding public confidence at a time when its privatisation is being positioned as a test case for broader economic reform.

Gaza force

NEARLY a month after the Gaza ceasefire took effect, and despite sustained violations by Israel, international focus has now shifted to the mechanics of the proposed multinational stabilisation force for the occupied Palestinian territory. The issue has reached the UN Security Council, while US President Donald Trump has said he expects the force to be in Gaza “very soon”. Yet many unanswered questions remain about the role of this force. For one, Israel wants minimal UN oversight, though most of the international community — including the states that will reportedly contribute troops — insist on a UN mandate. Secondly, the US resolution submitted to the UNSC reportedly calls for “demilitarising the Gaza Strip”, which is a euphemism for disarming Hamas and other Palestinian resistance groups. Given that Hamas has not committed to disarming, will this set the troops of the stabilisation force on a collision course with Palestinian factions?

As Pakistan is involved in discussions at the UN, and is also among the countries that may contribute troops, there must be absolute clarity about the mandate of the International Stabilisation Force. There should be no compromise on the demand for a UN mandate; only a force endorsed by the multilateral body, and acceptable to the Palestinians, will have the moral legitimacy to be in Gaza. Moreover, the language about demilitarisation of Gaza is even more contentious. If ISF peacekeepers go into the Strip, their primary mission should be to protect Palestinian civilians from Israel, to ensure that requisite aid reaches the devastated region, and that the process of rebuilding can begin. If the US and Israel use Muslim forces to bring Hamas and other Palestinian groups to heel, then it would be a grave mistake to commit troops to this mission. Therefore, a transparent mandate is required from the UNSC, while the matter must also be debated in parliament before Pakistan makes any commitments.

OPINION



BY AHMED BILAL MEHBOOB

LG constitutional amendment

There is a growing realisation in Pakistan that Article 140-A needs to be expanded.

SOMETHING extraordinary, if not unprecedented, has happened in the parliamentary history of Pakistan. The Punjab Assembly passed a unanimous resolution on Oct 28, with significant support from the PTT-aligned opposition, proposing that the national parliament amend and expand Article 140-A of the Constitution in order to strengthen the constitutional framework for local governments (LGs) in the country.

Although there had been more than one proposal to amend Article 140-A in the past, these came either from civil society, political parties or individual legislators. This is the first time that a provincial assembly made this demand, with its Speaker holding a press conference the next day to lend strong support to the idea of a constitutional amendment to end the near-dysfunctional state and, in some cases, the total absence of elected LGs for long periods of time.

A constitutional amendment bill drafted by the renowned constitutional lawyer Shahid Hamid, at the request of the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development And Transparency, was introduced by PTI senator Dr Sania Nishtar in the Senate in July 2023 to strengthen LGs in the country. The bill proposed the expansion of Article 140-A to include such details as elections taking place 60 days prior to the expiry of the LG term and the Sixth Schedule listing 36 subjects to be delegated to the LGs. The bill is pending before the Senate.

The MQM-P also introduced a constitutional amendment bill in the National Assembly in October 2024 to expand Article 140-A. The bill proposed the devolution of 42 subjects to the LGs. It called for a minimum guaranteed percentage of provincial revenue to be allocated to LGs and possibly directly transferred from the federal divisible pool to them. This bill also proposed the holding of LG elections before the expiry of their term.

The demand for a constitutional amendment to strengthen LGs started gaining momentum after almost 70 years of neglect of the LG system — a demand that was reinforced after the passage of the 18th Amendment in 2010 when significant

powers were devolved from the federation to the provinces, precisely demarcating the powers between the federation and the provinces. But the devolution from the provinces to the LGs was mentioned only in general terms through the insertion of the brief new Article 140-A (of 41 words). The new article provided that “each province shall establish a local government system and devolve political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local governments”, but, unlike in the case of the provincial governments, it gave no specific framework of LGs, such as the minimum powers, financial resources, term and elections. All these details were left to the provinces to decide through the LG laws to be framed by the respective provincial assemblies and, in the case of Islamabad, parliament.

Although 15 years have passed since the 18th Amendment, LGs in the country remain ineffective and powerless. Usually, ineffective LG laws are framed by the provinces and amended frequently — the Election Commission of Pakistan is unable to keep pace with the changes and thus unable to hold elections. A case in point is the election for the Islamabad Metropolitan Corporation where the last LG existed till 2021. Since then, whenever the ECP completed the demarcation of the LGs and announced the election schedule, the government amended the election schedule, the government amended the law changing the number of union councils, thus forcing the ECP to start the process of demarcation afresh. The ECP narrated its tragic tale of failures in a press release issued in May this year where it summed up how it had conducted delimitation of constituencies five times and the election schedule was issued thrice, only to be cancelled later because of last-minute changes in election laws.

There is an inherent conflict of interest between the provincial and local governments. Provincial governments do not want to let go of their powers and financial resources which have significantly increased since the passage of the 18th Amendment and the seventh NFC award. Generally, about one-third of the annual development funds are supposed to be spent through

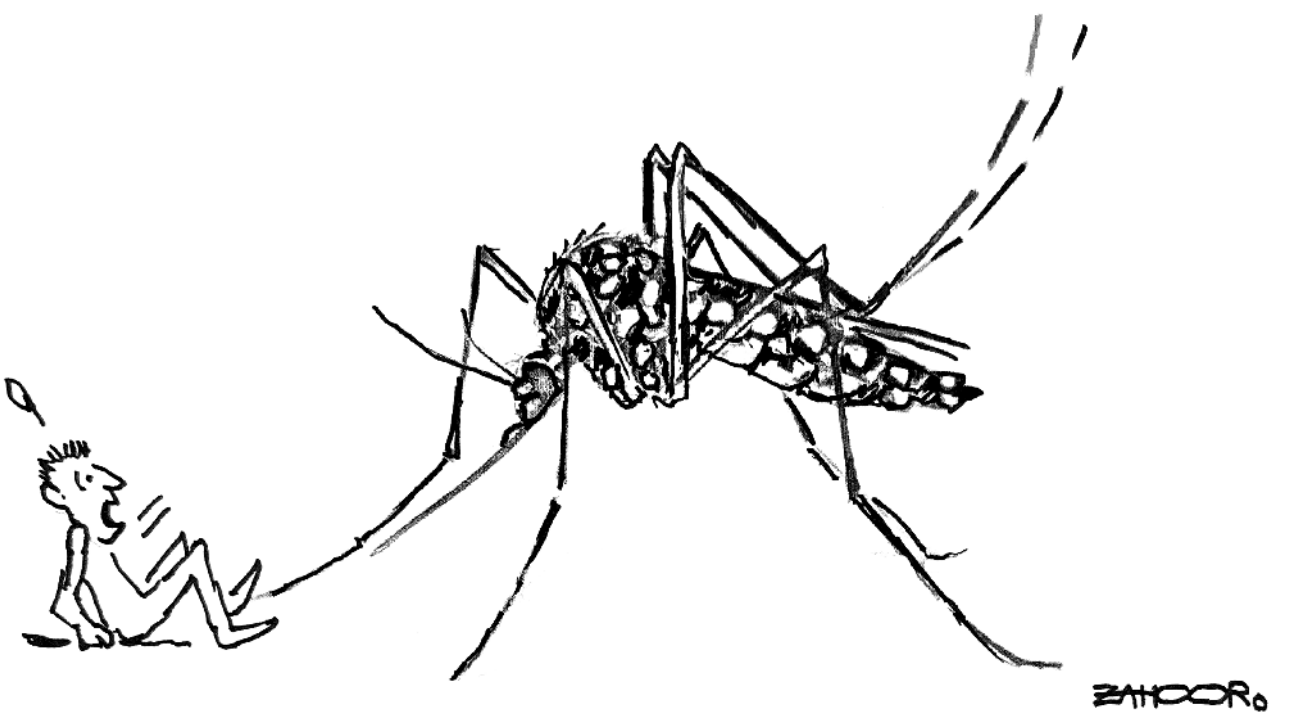
the LGs. No provincial government is, however, willing to part with these funds. In the absence of effective elected LGs, members of the national and provincial assemblies exercise considerable influence on local development spending and, therefore, are not keen on empowering LGs.

Neighbouring India faced a similar situation in the initial 42 years after enacting its constitution in 1950. In 1992, the Indian parliament passed two constitutional amendments inserting two full-fledged parts running into approximately 20 pages in the constitution. The 73rd amendment dealt with the panchayats or rural tier of the LGs and the 74th amendment was about the municipalities. The Statement of Objects and Reasons of these amendment acts reveal considerable similarities between present-day Pakistan and pre-1992 India. The statement says: “In many states local bodies have become weak and ineffective on account of a variety of reasons, including the failure to hold regular elections, prolonged supersessions and inadequate devolution of powers and functions. ... Having regard to these inadequacies, it is considered necessary that provisions relating to urban local bodies are incorporated in the Constitution...”

No wonder there is a strong and growing realisation in Pakistan too that Article 140-A needs to be expanded to outline details making it impossible for provinces to deny the establishment of effective LGs. One may make the case that the LGs are a provincial subject and, therefore, expanding Article 140-A may run counter to provincial autonomy. The reality is that no one is suggesting the removal of ‘local governments’ from the provincial legislative list but as the insertion of Article 140-A was not a violation of provincial autonomy in 2010, further expansion of this article providing a basic outline of LGs will not interfere with provincial rights either. ■

The writer is the president of Pakistan-based think tank, Pildat.
president@pildat.org
X: @ABMPildat

DENGUE OUTBREAK



BY AISHA KHAN

COP30: promise to performance

THE Conference of the Parties (COP) emerged under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Its purpose was clear yet ambitious: to provide a multilateral forum where nations could collectively agree on measures to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations and prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system.

The early years of the COP process reflected a sense of optimism. The Kyoto Protocol (1997) represented the first legally binding framework, committing industrialised countries to emission reductions. However, the absence of major emitters like the United States and the lack of commitments from developing countries weakened its implementation. The Copenhagen Summit (2009) exposed deep fractures between the developed and developing world over responsibility, finance, and fairness and marked a turning point in the politics of climate diplomacy.

This tension between collective ambition and national interest has defined every COP since. Despite a shared understanding that no single nation can solve the climate crisis alone, each negotiation cycle has been mired in differing historical responsibilities, domestic economic priorities and conflicting definitions of ‘justice’ and ‘equity’.

At the heart of climate diplomacy lies a paradox that explains why a universally accepted agreement remains elusive in achieving its objective: *the countries that are most responsible for climate change are not the ones most vulnerable to its effects*. Industrialised nations built their wealth on fossil fuels, while developing countries like Pakistan now bear the brunt of resulting climate impacts of floods, droughts, glacial melt and food insecurity with limited capacity to adapt. Efforts to reach universal consensus are stymied by this historical imbalance. The North-South divide manifests in three recurring areas of contention:

Responsibility and burden-sharing: Developed countries resist strong language on liability and compensation, while developing countries demand recognition of loss and damage as a matter of climate justice.

Finance: Despite pledges, the promise on climate finance has not been fully delivered, and falls far short of need.

Ambition gap: Many countries’ Nationally

Determined Contributions remain insufficient to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius. The gap between pledges and implementation continues to widen. While the COP remains a vital arena for dialogue, its consensus-based decision-making model often leads to lowest-common-denominator outcomes with statements of intent rather than binding commitments.

The Paris Agreement (2015), celebrated as a diplomatic triumph for crafting a flexible, bottom-up framework, marked a shift from imposed obligations to voluntary pledges. Yet, a decade later, the reality is sobering. Global emissions continue to rise, and current trajectories point towards warming of around 2.7°C by the end of the century. Climate disasters from catastrophic floods in Pakistan to record heatwaves across

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Europe and droughts in the Horn of Africa underline that adaptation is no longer a distant concern but an immediate survival challenge.

Meanwhile, the COP process itself has evolved or devolved into what many observers now describe as a ‘climate fair’. Conference halls are crowded not only with negotiators but also with corporations, NGOs and lobbyists, all vying for visibility. While this diversity of actors fosters innovation and awareness, it has also blurred the focus. The spectacle often overshadows substance and announcements frequently outnumber actual deliverables. The risk is that COPs have become a performative rather than transformative stage for declarations, not decisions. Real progress increasingly occurs in smaller coalitions or outside the formal UNFCCC framework, through initiatives such as climate finance partnerships, regional adaptation programmes, and private sector decarbonisation alliances.

For Pakistan, it is time to reframe its approach from normative attendance to strategic influ-

ence using COP not just as a diplomatic event but a platform for survival advocacy. To make its participation strategic, Pakistan should consider the following approach:

1. Adopt a justice-centred narrative framing its stance around *climate justice* and *resilience through equity*. Its experience as a climate frontline state gives moral authority to demand parity between adaptation and mitigation in global finance and policy.

2. Lead on regional solidarity as part of the Third Pole region to champion a *South-South cooperation framework* focused on shared challenges, glacier melt, river basin management, and food and water security. Regional diplomacy around climate resilience could become a signature pillar of Pakistan’s foreign policy.

3. Champion the loss and damage agenda for capitalisation — simplified access, grant-based finance and inclusion of local communities in rebuilding and adaptation planning.

4. Invest in science, storytelling, and strategy: negotiations are driven by data and diplomacy. Pakistan should strengthen its climate data infrastructure, empower young negotiators and amplify its stories of resilience, turning lived experiences into global advocacy tools.

5. Forge strategic partnerships: beyond government-to-government engagement, Pakistan can build alliances with global think tanks, civil society, and climate innovators to position itself as a thought leader on adaptation finance and resilience-building.

The journey from Kyoto to Paris, and now towards COP30, reveals both progress and paralysis in global climate diplomacy. While the world has learned to talk about climate change with unprecedented urgency, it has yet to act with equal conviction. For Pakistan, participation in COP must transcend attendance. It should be about shaping narratives, mobilising alliances and asserting leadership among the Global South. By focusing its voice on justice, adaptation, and regional solidarity, Pakistan can not only safeguard its national interests but also contribute meaningfully to a fairer and more resilient global climate order. ■

The writer is chief executive of the Civil Society Coalition for Climate Change.
aisha@csecc.org.pk